

Chapter 7: Destiny of a Race

"The destiny of a race is not in the keeping of one President or one party or one epoch of history. I have an abiding faith in the future." Timothy Thomas Fortune to Booker T. Washington, December 17, 1898

The news of the riot traveled throughout the state across by telegraph and through letters. Leading the effort to publicize the events in Wilmington was Raleigh editor Josephus Daniels. The *News and Observer* carried headlines from Wilmington, Raleigh, and Washington, D. C., to show that statewide and national interest focused on Wilmington. Within a week of the violence, John Spencer Bassett, history professor at Trinity College in Durham, wrote to colleague Herbert Baxter Adams that the riot was "justifiable at no point." Monitoring the campaign and violence from his academic tower, Bassett observed that Wilmington's black population was "cowed" and that most whites in the state did not believe the accusations of "negro domination" thrown about by Democrats. Bassett saw the irony in the situation, writing that when Waddell, who had just led a mob to destroy the *Record* press, was made mayor, his first order of business was to demand an end to the violence: "If he [Waddell] had any sense of humor he must have split his undergarments laughing at his own joke."¹

State and National Reaction

Governor Daniel L. Russell first learned of the crisis in the city by a series of telegrams from Walker Taylor and George Morton. He reacted by sending troops from nearby towns to the city. But Russell's hands were tied by political maneuvers of the Democrats, who had threatened impeachment, and by Red Shirts, who had threatened bodily harm. Two days after the

riot, a newspaper observed that many "freely predicted that Governor Russell will be on his good behavior henceforth in view of the Democratic Legislature which is elected."² After the election and the coup, Russell considered resigning his office even after Democrats relaxed their impeachment rhetoric. However, he did not resign, and the Democrats began to move forward with their agenda despite the fact that Russell still had two more years in office.³

The Democratic Party's effort to silence and threaten Republicans and Populists was effective. Other members of state government followed Russell's example, remaining quiet and uninvolved. As part of his Fusion campaign, Russell had tried to bridge differences in Republican, Democratic, and Populist Party leadership circles by distributing political appointments across the parties. Thus, once the Democrats began their campaign, Russell may not have been able to communicate well with some of his Council of State members. Russell regularly called meetings of his council, and, on November 10, 1898, the council met but only to discuss a printing contract. None of their official minutes address the problems in Wilmington before or after the violence.⁴ One member of Russell's council, Attorney General Zebulon

² *Morning Star* (Wilmington), November 12, 1898.

³ Murmur of impeachment made it to the papers as soon as the dust settled from the election and violence. The *Messenger* asked its readers if it was possible that the newly elected Democratic legislature would impeach Russell in 1899. *Wilmington Messenger*, November 12, 1898. For more on the impact of the 1898 election on Russell's administration, see Crow, *Maverick Republican*, 134-188.

⁴ Minutes, 1898-1899, Council of State, Governor's Papers, State Archives, Office of Archives and History, Raleigh.

¹ John Spencer Bassett to Herbert Baxter Adams, November 15, 1898 from the Herbert Baxter Adams Papers, Johns Hopkins University as quoted in McDuffie, "Politics in Wilmington," 749.